

Water wars near an end?

Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta plan is the key

In the past two years, an amazing thing has happened in California's water wars.

At one time, the three combatants — cities, agricultural interests, environmentalists — were at each other's throats in courtrooms and in Congress. But today a fragile peace exists.

On Thursday, an announcement will be made that could be one of the biggest events in the history of the state's water wars: It will decide whether California cities and agriculture will have a guaranteed water supply for the next decade.

A guaranteed water supply may be the most important economic challenge facing San Diego and the rest of California. Cities must be able to guarantee businesses and industries a stable, adequate water supply. If they can, it will be a boost to the state's economy. If they can't, it could ultimately prove disastrous to the state's economy. That's basically what will be decided on Thursday.

As usual, the announcement itself will be much more arcane. Federal environmental agencies will hold a press conference to announce new rules on how much water can be pumped out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta without harming endangered fish species, most notably the winter-run and spring-run salmon and the delta smelt.

Here's why that is so important: The delta provides water to more than 20 million urban and rural residents. It also provides irrigation for 200 crops, including 45 percent of the nation's fruits and vegetables. And it provides life support for 120 species of fish, along with large commercial and recreational fisheries.

Everyone agrees the delta is in danger. Urban and agricultural water agencies have accepted that changes must be made to protect the environment. And

environmentalists have accepted that economic considerations must be addressed when fixing the delta.

That's where we are now. In what they agree is a remarkable consensus, major urban and agricultural water agencies have devised a short-term solution for the delta problems. It addresses environmental needs while still providing a reliable water supply for cities and farms.

Environmentalists, farmers and cities agree on most of the protections for the delta. Where there is not agreement is on exactly how much water must be allowed to flow out to sea in order to protect fish.

The agriculture and urban plan proposes a multifaceted system to protect the environment, including such things as habitat restoration and putting screens on water pumps to save fish. That could allow more water to be exported to cities.

The sticking point right now is convincing field biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service to be flexible and to consider how federal limits on delta water exports will influence California's economy. It's up to top-level federal officials, including Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Assistant Secretary Betsy Rieke, to make sure the federal stance on the delta won't hurt the state's economic recovery.

Meetings are under way right now between federal and state officials to iron this out before Thursday. Gov. Pete Wilson and state water officials have an extremely important role to play as the brokers for peace in the water wars. They need to convince everyone that only a consensus plan will avoid a return to warfare.

Common ground exists. All sides need to find it by Thursday.